Viking’s April 7 reveal of U.S. cruises expected to include Memphis

WILLIAM RISHER
Courtesy of The Daily Memphian

The logic behind a proposed upgrade of Beale Street Landing becomes clearer with new signals about Viking’s plans to begin Mississippi River cruising in 2022.

The Norway-based line of river and ocean cruises has been talking to dock owners up and down the Mississippi, including operators of Beale Street Landing, about docking agreements.

Memphis River Parks Partnership officials have said a third company is expected to enter the market in 2022, but they’ve declined to name the company. The partnership operates Beale Street Landing.

Viking Cruises last week invited news media to an April 7 event at Mardi Gras World in New Orleans where it will announce “the newest and most ambitious river voyages in America’s heartland.” The announcement is scheduled to be made by Viking chairman Torstein Hagen.

Asked about plans for Mississippi River cruises and docking in Memphis, a Viking spokeswoman said, “Viking continues to work on the Mississippi project, but at this point we are not able to share additional details.”

Beale Street Landing currently serves the American Queen Steamboat Company and American Cruise Lines, which are slated to have seven ships docking in Memphis after each company adds a ship this year.

The partnership recently asked a City Council construction budget committee for a $3.5 million appropriation to upgrade Beale Street Landing. Some of the improvements would help it handle more overnight cruise ships.

Viking’s bid to expand onto U.S. rivers, originally announced in 2015, was slowed by a federal law, the Jones Act, that would force the company to use U.S.-built vessels and American workers.

Cruise industry publications reported recently that Viking’s plans were taking shape with approval of docking agreements on the upper Mississippi River. Viking also has announced it will start cruising the Great Lakes in 2022.

Viking officials have told officials in potential port cities that the company has an agreement with Edison Chouest Offshore, a Louisiana company, to build and own vessels that would be chartered to Viking.

Viking provided Dubuque, Iowa, officials in 2018 with information showing Viking planned to have six vessels on the Mississippi by 2027.

Byhalia Connection pipeline plan sparks intense reactions

WILLIAM RISHER
Courtesy of The Daily Memphian

“Worst” and “largest” aren’t comforting descriptions of past oil spills by a company that wants to build a new pipeline through Greater Memphis.

Even though the spills — more than 140,000 gallons on the California coast in 2015 and more than 1 million gallons in Canada’s Peace River in 2011 — occurred on aging pipelines that Plains All American Pipeline didn’t build itself.

Asked about plans for Byhalia Connection pipeline in Marshall County, the pipeline is expected to carry as much as $21 million in crude oil a day moving from Oklahoma to the Gulf Coast.

“It’s nice to have your own piece of land without people telling you what to do. And now we’ve got bullies coming in, big oil, telling us what we can and can’t do,” said Chris Pilcher, who believes the pipeline will reduce the value of his DeSoto County property as well as endangering the environment.

WAYNE RISHER
Courtesy of The Daily Memphian

Storage tanks on Wingo Road sit at the terminus of the Byhalia Connection pipeline in Marshall County. The pipeline was completed in 2019 and is expected to reach annual capacity of 21 million barrels of oil per year in 2021.

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RESIDENTS SCRUTINIZE PLANS

Memphis resident Wright came to a Plains information session at a Westwood church recently with questions about how selling right-of-way for the pipeline might affect a wooded, 5-acre tract off Weaver Road. The land once belonged to her late husband’s grandmother.

“Is it going to affect the environment in this area? Does it devalue my property?” Wright said. “It’s old forest land, but it borders with people who have homes, going west.”

She and her late husband saved the family tract at a tax sale 30 years ago.

“It’s just been in the family ever since, and we wanted to stay there,” Wright said.

David Gross learned the pipeline comes within 2.9 miles of his home in southwest Memphis, and said he was fairly satisfied with company explanations about how it would be built and operated.

“I wouldn’t say I’m worried, but I would always be concerned, because anything that is made, it can be not perfected. We might think it’s perfected but it’s not,” Gross said.

The DeSoto County Board of Supervisors wrote to Plains chief executive officer Willie Chiang to oppose the pipeline “through the heart of prime real estate in DeSoto County” and to ask for an alternate route.

Citing “no direct benefit” to DeSoto County residents and Plains’ history of more than a dozen spills in the U.S. and Canada since 2004, the board wrote, “Simply put, there are other places the Corporation could construct the pipeline to avoid so severely impacting the growth, environment and property values of DeSoto County.”

Supervisors began hearing from residents in the middle of 2019 about surveyors making contact on behalf of a pipeline company. While the board’s only power is over pipeline crossings affecting county property such as roads, the lack of respect from Plains in the early stages irked supervisors.

“On the front end, they didn’t want to give us a map of the route. That’s too secretive, to me. We’re the governing body of this county,” said board president Jessie Medlin.

“That oil is coming to be exported,” Medlin added. “Really, we’re not getting anything out of it.”

UNWELCOME NEIGHBOR

The pipeline plan is rocked Chris Pilcher’s world.

Pilcher and his wife bought five rural acres and built a home off Olive Branch a year ago, not knowing the pipeline was coming.

“Recent plans call for it to come within 30 feet of the yard where the Pilcher’s children, 3 and 6, play.”

Pilcher is afraid of what the pipeline could mean, both environmentally and value wise, for the neighborhood of large-lot homes surrounding by farm land and drained by a creek that meanders south toward the Coldwater River.

“It’s nice to have your own piece of land without people telling you what to do. And now we’ve got bullies coming in, big oil, telling us what we can and can’t do,” Pilcher said.

“I think we need to stop it, I really do,” Pilcher said. “No need for it. If anything, we need to be looking for more clean energy solutions.”

We’ve got enough oil. When we’re looking at climate change and global warming, why would we put more crap in the ground that’s going to produce more of that?”

CROSSING THE AQUIFER

Representatives of the Sierra Club and Protect Our Aquifer say the pipeline would pass through areas of known or suspected breaches in the aquifer, including a well field that supplies drinking water to southwest Memphis.

On the east end, a significant section of pipeline would cross land where the aquifer rises up on the surface, known as the recharge zone.

The Sierra Club regards the pipeline as unnecessary and a threat to the environment, said Scott Banbury, conservation program coordinator, Tennessee Chapter of the Sierra Club.

“The Sierra Club’s position is that the build-out of all these unnecessary crude oil and natural gas pipelines for exports is anathema to our goal of stopping climate change,” Banbury said. “We should be leaving fossil fuels in the ground. If not, we should be using them for our own needs, not burning them as quickly as possible.”

The club also is wary of damage to surface and groundwater and the underlying Memphis Sands aquifer during construction and operation of the pipeline.

“If we ever have a severe earthquake near Memphis, these pipelines are going to go. It’s not a matter of if they’re going to leak, but when they’ll leak,” Banbury said.

The Association of Oil Pipeline 2019 annual report said liquid pipelines delivered product safely 99.9996% of the time and that accidents affecting people or the environment dropped 20% over five years. Total pipeline deliveries of oil were up 44% over five years, at 6.5 billion barrels.

But an extremely small percentage of failure could translate into a large oil spill.

Pipeline operator Enbridge told the U.S. Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration that its Enbridge Line 9 pipeline in Michigan failed on March 17, 2010, after it had run for almost 60 years. The pipeline breaks killed six people and caused an estimated $200 million in damage.

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Regulating the Pipeline

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Deborah Carington, a geologist who serves on Protect Our Aquifer’s board, has questioned Plains officials extensively about the pipeline’s environmental impact.

“What came away from those meetings with was they’re not having to speak to the aquifer or seismic hazards in the permitting process,” Carington said.

In a letter to Plains, Carington wrote, “Based on public data, adequate quantification of actual or potential impacts to the unconfined or unconfined area of the Memphis/Sparta aquifer in DeSoto and Marshall Counties. The unconfined area is where the Memphis/Sparta aquifer is present at the surface and therefore most vulnerable to a pipeline leak which could result in direct contamination of the source of our drinking water.

“Additionally, the entire route should be considered sensitive because even where a confining clay layer isolates the Memphis aquifer, a spill could result in present and breaches or windows in the confining clay layer can allow contamination from the surface to reach the deeper Memphis aquifer,” Carington added.

A Horn Lake native, Carington received a master’s degree in geology from the University of Memphis where she worked as a graduate assistant at the university’s earthquake research center and later moved to Texas.

Carington serves on the Edwardsville town council and is on the site’s elect-ed board that oversees San Anto-nio’s water supply. She and her sis-ters still own the family home on Church Road, about 2 miles from the pipeline route.

Carington said she was surprised to find no permit require-ment for crossing the aquifer.

“I was really just floored to learn that they did not have to consider groundwater in their application, that they didn’t have to have a permit to do the pipeline project that the public could see, about the possible negative impacts to the aquifer and our groundwater, especially because this is the drink-ing water source for such a large area,” Carington said.

Plains Pipeline continued on P3
Plains has committed to a third-party seismic study and to consult with experts on the aquifer, including the Center for Applied Earth Science and Engineering Research (CAESER) at the University of Memphis. CAESER officials say their goal is to determine if there are known or suspected breaches in the aquifer.

Earth Science and Engineering Research is doing the environmental studies, including the Center for Applied Geosciences, wetlands and other resources along the route. Howard said, "We're currently finishing all of our field work right now. We have our third-party consultants in the field doing all the wetland and waterway delineation. I and E (threatened and endangered) species review and cultural resources review. We don't have a full number of water crossings at this point, but we do know we're going to be submitting everything we find to the Corps of Engineers. They'll review all the different water crossings."